

Transformative Education in Vermont Framework Summary

We are working to improve the system - to prepare our children to build the future.

Vision –

Every learner completes his or her public education with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, continuing education, careers, and citizenship. The public education system provides flexible learning environments rich with 21st century tools that promote self-development, academic achievement, and active engagement in learning. It operates within a framework of high expectations for every learner with support from educators, families and the community.

Mission –

Provide leadership, support and oversight to ensure that the Vermont public education system enables each student to be successful.

Universal measurable objectives reflective of our vision & mission –

Every child must:

- Have an opportunity to learn in 21st Century learning environments.
- Graduate high school having achieved proficiency in reading, math, science, writing and 21st Century skill development.
- Be well prepared to enter college or training in a career of their choosing.

2010-2015 Strategic Plan Goals –

1. Provide learning environments and instructional practices that support multiple ways of learning, yield deep understanding and application of essential knowledge and skills, and ensure the success of every student.
2. Establish learning expectations and assessments that emphasize a personalized learning experience and incorporates the knowledge and skills essential for all PreK-12 learners to be successful in the 21st century and beyond.
3. Work to ensure all levels of Vermont's public education system are guided by effective, transformative educational leaders.
4. Improve student success across the continuum of PreK-16 education, including strengthening kindergarten readiness, increasing student engagement and educational relevance in K-12 education, and improving post-secondary aspiration, continuation, and completion rates for all learners.
5. Promote state and local policy and governance structures that facilitate attainment of the educational practices and student outcomes articulated in the Vision statement and goals.

Achieving these goals requires of us a bold new way of addressing problems old and new. We must hold on to a different vision for education that lives at the heart of our work – having new learning expectations for all learners, embracing new and multiple ways of deep learning and understanding, providing challenge and individual opportunity through proficiency based education, and insisting on equity in education outcomes. While graduation, proficiency and 21st century success are all key outcomes of our work, we know all learners in Vermont do not advance successfully in the current educational paradigm. In order to address this problem effectively, we must be willing to dig deeper to understand how we might change our approach to teaching and leading in order to accomplish these goals for every Vermont learner. Times are different for our young people, our teachers, our principals, our communities and our department. External factors are affecting our schools in ways we do not yet fully grasp. Therefore, we must continually explore these changes to understand how they are influencing the

learning process. We must include those students who are most disadvantaged in our thinking; creating a system that compels necessary adaptation and innovation now, yet continues to do so over time. This is how we will provide for all our students the high-quality education for which our state is known, by creating communities where *all* learners thrive.

Our Greatest Strengths Present Unique Challenges

Historically we are known for innovation in education, small school communities, low student teacher ratios, and high inclusion rates for children with disabilities. Yet when we disaggregate our student achievement data we get to the heart of an issue of need. We know for example that like most other states, Vermont children who live in poverty and with disabilities or are English language learners in large part under-perform in core subject areas. And while we have poverty and minority populations, these young people are in many cases spread out across our state without the numbers or concentration of urban centers or larger states. For this and other reasons mentioned above, it is imperative that we develop a strong system of statewide support for improving instruction and learning for all our young people.

To further our understanding of the issues facing Vermont educators, we conducted our own research study, *Roots of Success: Effective Practices in Vermont Schools* (Vermont Department of Education, 2009). A major result of this study was the identification of key features of successful schools within Vermont and its rural context. This report tells a story. The story is that even though Vermont outperforms most states in popular national measures, we know we have young people whose educational needs are not being met. The story is that we don't accept the notion of the bell curve and we believe it is a moral imperative to be purposeful about instituting practices that result in effective teachers and principals who can pay attention to the learning achievements of all their students within the context of their communities. These schools provide both high expectations for learning and the kinds of environments in which those expectations are actually achieved. In hindsight, the findings are not surprising – reinforcing research conducted in other countries and states – but they also confirm what many of us recognize by experience. Ensuring every child learns and excels comes down to four factors: 1) expectations for learning and teaching, 2) leadership, 3) school culture and 4) family engagement.

More specifically, the schools that were successful in ensuring all children were able to learn and thrive in their communities had the following eight attributes of effective systems:

1. **High Expectations** – believing all students can succeed.
2. **Continuous Improvement** – taking responsibility for students' achievement, working to continually improve practice to address students' diverse needs.
3. **Leadership** – providing strong leadership.
4. **Use of Data** – using data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff, as well as monitor progress for and support students.
5. **Professional Teaching Culture** – establishing a professional teaching culture that supports high quality instruction.
6. **Student Supports** – ensuring a comprehensive and highly functioning support system is in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral and social needs.
7. **School Climate** – creating a supportive climate where expectations are clear and all students, adults and family members are valued.
8. **Family Engagement** – building constructive respectful relationships with families and involving them in their child's learning.

From Theory to Practice

Establishing a coherent framework with these features in our schools takes time, consistent leadership and state and school-wide engagement. Having all schools in Vermont fully embody these attributes will take

support, commitment and a sense of shared responsibility and leadership from all of us – the department, the State Board, the Legislature, leaders and members of the community, the Governor, educators, parents and students. This collaborative focus at all levels allows us to prioritize the best characteristics of implementation so all children in all schools can succeed.

- Aligning innovations to the goals, culture and capacity of our organizations and each other.
- Establishing fluency in the innovation(s), understanding the “what,” the “how,” and the “why” of the changes throughout our schools, not just at the top.
- Understanding the stages of implementation and implications for practice.
- Building implementation capacity, including resources, systemic adaptation to support changes and high-leverage policy to drive change.
- Systemic reflection and adaptation – the ability to measure what is working and what is not, and the willingness to continue what is working and discontinue what is not.

To move beyond pilots and demonstration sites, these efforts must be connected to key strategies for sustaining and scaling up best practices across the state, starting where it matters – at the interface between teachers and students. We must answer the questions:

- What needs to happen in the classroom so educators interact with learners as intended?
- At the school level?
- At the district/supervisory union levels?
- At the state level?

To effectively support and implement Vermont education system changes, we must recognize and respond to the real barriers to change. It is not that people resist change, but that people resist things like loss, incompetence, and disloyalty that they perceive accompany that change. Our teachers, principals, leaders and staff are experiencing: a) loss of old ways of doing things, b) fear of being incompetent in a new environment or responsibility, and c) concern over changing relationships, expectations and loyalties in the new system, structure or ways of working. In order to overcome these concerns, we must continue to engage those individuals in the process of creating the change and redefining structures and support systems to compel and reinforce the change (Westwind, 2009).

State Board of Education Transformation Policy Commission

Recognizing that moving from theory to practice requires systemic change and an interconnected policy framework to support and drive the change, the State Board of Education formed the Education Transformation Policy Commission in March 2009 to advise the Board in forming the framework. This commission, comprised of educators, legislators, organizational leaders, school board members, students and parents, put forth the following high leverage policy recommendations:

1. **Learning Expectations** – Redefine learning standards so they are aligned with 21st century performance demands and are fewer, higher and deeper.
2. **Student Assessments** – Align assessments with 21st century skills and shift when and how assessments are conducted.
3. **Teaching and Learning Practices** – Establish a teaching and learning model that emphasizes deeper learning, in-depth interdisciplinary applications, and required proficiency demonstrations, and require proficiency-based grading and graduation.
4. **Personalized Learning** – Establish a flexible education system that can support each learner to achieve at high levels.

5. **Educator Quality** – Design educator licensing, professional development, career ladders, evaluation and working conditions to support transformed educational practice.
6. **Systems and Structures** – Establish governance, funding, policies and learning structures to support 21st century education goals and practices.
7. **Postsecondary Connections** – Align PK-16 learning pathways and blend secondary and postsecondary learning experiences. Establish proficiency-based secondary graduation requirements and align secondary graduation requirements with postsecondary entry requirements.

Reprioritizing the Work of the Vermont Department of Education

Vermont State Board of Education Transformation goals require a new emphasis on the part of Department of Education staff that models the tenets of transformation, supports the strategies and goals defined, and positions the department to increase support for schools in ultimately improving outcomes for all Vermont learners. Additionally, requirements from the U.S. Department of Education increasingly emphasize statewide reform and systematic efforts for a) improving the lowest performing schools, b) increasing achievement levels for all students, c) implementing data systems to assess student outcomes and improve instruction, and d) increasing teacher and principal effectiveness. Last and most importantly, the achievement data for our most disadvantaged students shows us we are not reaching them effectively with our current approach to school support and improvement.

The structure we have defined is intentionally focused on mobilizing all of our staff to –

1. Support schools in improving instruction and learning outcomes for all students.
2. Organize our work differently by forming school support teams comprised of multiple consultants with varying areas of educational expertise and working together both vertically and horizontally:
 - a. Vertically – multidisciplinary teams designed to work with school and supervisory union leadership teams to implement evidence-based practices from Pre-K to college and workforce designed to increase relevance, improve achievement and create success for all learners. Highest priority for support is given to schools identified for not making adequate yearly progress, especially those schools identified over multiple years. The focus is on those evidence-based practices (strategies) which have demonstrated success in closing achieving gaps for children in poverty, children with disabilities, and/or English language learners, and increasing the graduation rate to 100%.
 - b. Horizontally – stay current on best practice in areas of related expertise, learn new skills and practices and bring all of this to bear on our school support, general supervision and teacher and student standards development work.
3. Ensure that Finance, IT, legal, HR, and communications are well integrated and support our ability to operate as a holistic system, all focused on the common goal of increasing learning opportunities for our children.
4. Provide general oversight and monitoring the use of federal and state funds. The application of regulation is provided in a way that assists educators and administrators in making informed decisions on the effective use of funds to improve instruction and student learning.
5. Define standards, assessments, and research and share best practice information. This will enable consultants working with schools to reflect on practice while remaining forward focused.
6. Define standards for teachers and principals in implementing best practice. Use the licensing process, educator preparation, and ongoing professional learning to guide leadership development, and reinforce best practice.

Toward this end, the Department has reprioritized its work and continues to restructure working relationships to facilitate a statewide system of support that improves instruction and learning outcomes for all Vermont learners and functionally recognizes the continuum of education from early childhood to young adulthood and beyond.

The Department works to embrace the following principles as we redefine our work –

- Communication, collaboration, cooperation, and coordination.
- High expectations for every one of our students – not just some.
- Purposeful engagement of our partners in the field – new and old.
- Developing new opportunities for leadership in education in Vermont.

The diagram below provides an overview of this plan –

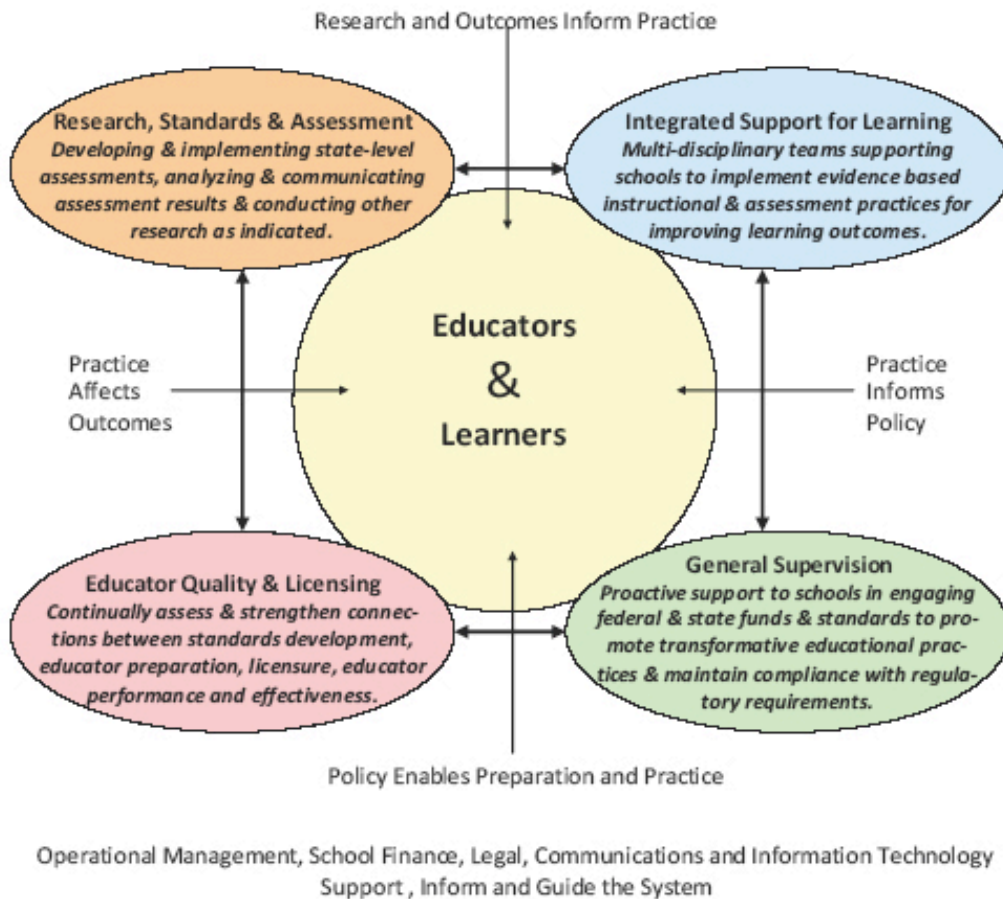


Diagram of Vermont Department of Education Structure – January 2010

Funding to Support Transformative Education

In theory, it should cost no more to support a transformed educational system than it does now. In practice however, there are significant upfront costs associated with change of this magnitude:

1. The staffing cost of researching and planning for implementation of new practice while maintaining old practices.
2. The cost of upgrading data systems and technology to provide the information and tools necessary to drive instructional improvements.

3. The costs of providing professional learning opportunities to existing educators.
4. The costs of renegotiating contracts to provide for new learning opportunities for educators, to provide for increased time for teacher collaboration and student learning.
5. The costs of retrofitting facilities to be more conducive to learning technology and structures.

We would be remiss in looking at the investment costs without looking also at the savings and benefits:

1. Increased numbers of students with disabilities able to access the regular education curriculum independently in the classroom thereby decreasing special education costs.
2. Increased numbers of students staying in school rather than dropping out or ending up in the juvenile justice system, therefore reducing the numbers of students requiring expensive alternative programs and services.
3. Increased numbers of students in poverty, with disabilities and English language learners graduating with the ability to succeed in college and the competitive workforce, thereby decreasing the numbers of adults and families requiring assistance and increasing state revenues through a strengthened workforce.
4. Increased numbers of high school and college graduates available to support viable business migration to Vermont.
5. Increasing numbers of young people seeing Vermont as a place to not only grow up, but to work and raise families of their own.

It is incumbent upon us to consider all funding opportunities to support this work including the following:

1. Repurposing and prioritizing existing federal and state funding.
2. New England Secondary School Consortium Phase II funding for implementation.
3. Federal School Improvement Grant through Title I.
4. Potential savings through re-districting and regionalization of services at the local level.
5. Race to the Top Assessment Consortium grant funding for pilot states.

Conclusion

Accomplishing this work means thinking beyond the concept of alignment and collaboration. To facilitate the kind of sweeping change defined above, alignment will not be enough. In alignment, we might be able to set things next to one another and find commonalities – a belief that one will ultimately serve the other. In alignment, as long as we are going in the same direction we don't actually have to work together. We could keep working separately in our own worlds – toward common goals maybe – but in alignment, things are clean and linear. We are just ensuring one *thing* does not impede the progress of the other. We must think instead of *convergence*. We must think of reaching across organizations and agencies in very purposeful ways designed to ensure that we are all working to compel the common goal forward.

Instead of working only to ensure that our goals are aligned while our views on how we get there differ so greatly; instead of working to ensure that we don't bump into each other too violently in this messy business of systems change, what if we did what we came to work to do and converged our efforts on the common goal of improving instruction and learning and the long term success of *all* of our young people?

Converging as opposed to aligning our efforts means everyone gives some ground. Policies and systems are redesigned in ways that move the transformation forward quickly. *White elephants* are identified and new common ground is established. In convergence, one process is designed to compel another forward. As we form commissions to craft an implementation plan for our goals, let us continue to think as boldly as the Transformation Policy Commission did in crafting its recommendations. Let us think not of

stakeholder *representation* as we decide who is going to sit on these commissions to define a plan for making the recommendations a reality for Vermont learners. Let us think instead of engagement. Let us engage individuals from stakeholder groups who can think and act boldly yet thoughtfully to move this work forward. Let's change the conversation from making sure our own stakeholder needs are met to melding our efforts in ensuring the goals for our children are met. Our conversations should be about the young people we are trying to serve. Our conversations could be about finding the most efficient and effective ways to converge our efforts in order to help our children learn and grow.

Everything else is secondary.